
Joint Center for Albanian-Serbian relations: a strategic project for the European future of both countries

The Albanian Institute of International Studies (AIIS) organized on October 27 a public event to launch the Joint Center for Albanian Serbian Relations, a joint initiative of the two centers AIIS in Tirana and The Forum for International Relations of the European Movement Serbia. During the event some key results from a public poll conducted in September of this year with a national sample of 1200 respondents.

In the opening remarks, AIIS **Executive Director Albert Rakipi**, highlighted the strategic nature of this joint project in the new context of relations between Albania and Serbia. Mr Rakipi reminisced about the incident of the soccer match last year which served to highlight the fact that many challenges lay undiscovered until incidents happen and that misconceptions between societies existed deep down. Rakipi noted that “During the last two years Albanian Serbian relations have seen ups and down just like one year ago when they were close to a crisis similar to the times of the Cold War. Moreover the governments of the two countries for some time applied instruments of communication typical to the times of the Cold War. The idea to establish a joint center for the Albania-Serbia relations came as a reflection upon the context of the developments in the relations between the two countries.”

Rakipi added that the Centre is a strategic project of AIIS and the European Movement Serbia for the future of both countries as well as of the entire region.

Frank Hantke, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Institute of Albania, that has supported the survey highlighted the importance of the normalization of the relations of the two countries following the good example of the French-German Reconciliation process. Hantke brought the example of his upbringing as beneficiary of a generation that enjoyed peace and stressed the need to have a positive, “even naïve” outlook for the future.

The preliminary results of “Albanian Serbian relations for the eyes of the Albanian public”, survey were presented by AIIS researcher Dritan Sulcebe. The national poll conducted in Albania showed national support for normalization of relations between two states and the need for more mutual cultural exchanges.

According to the survey, 45% of the respondents described the Serbian-Albanian relations as normal, while 90% thought that “Albania and Serbia should deepen their relations because this is in the best interest of both countries“. The second result is the most significant one since it contradicts the other options often perpetuated in public discourse that the relations will improve only because Brussels or Berlin have requested so. When asked if they have any information on joint cultural activities between Serbia and Albania, 61% of the respondents said they were not informed, however a large majority was willing to support such activities. To the question: “Should there be more joint cultural activities between both countries?“, 81% of the respondents answered „Yes“.

Naturally divisions exist and linger in perceptions when it comes to defining incidents such as that of last years soccer match for which the majority of Albanian citizens, more than 70 percent blame Serbia.

Despite this the majority of Albanians expect that in the future relations will move towards improvement, with 54 percent of them saying relations will expand and improve in comparison to 32 percent that expect stagnation and only 3 percent that say they will deteriorate.

The results of the survey already point out some of the areas for intervention and some of the potential ideas that need to be undertaken. It is precisely in these areas that the initiative presented in this event, the Joint Center, will concentrate its work. Hence, Ms. Alba Cela, Deputy Director AIIS, presented the project of the Centre for Albanian Serbian relations, a Joint initiative of the Albanian Institute for International Studies and the Forum for International Relations of European Movement Serbia. The project has started as a cloud of joint and parallel activities between the two institutions however its ultimate ambition is to establish a functioning center both in Albania and Serbia. One of the main objectives of this center is the normalization of bilateral relations, as well as increasing opportunities for young people, professionals and journalists to know each-other. The activities that the center is planning to host vary from studies, reports and surveys to exchanges of students, academics and journalists. The center targets various groups such as decision makers- offering them comprehensive analysis and policy recommendations, youth – by increasing their interaction and providing venues to learn together as well as business community by assisting them with networking and research. The

Center will also be invested in cultural activities hosting joint artistic events and later on potential language learning units in Tirana and Belgrade.

Next year AIIS plans to host its traditional European Academy also by inviting speakers and participants from Serbia where the topic of EU integration can be discussed among all participants as it is the future that both countries aspire to have.

The project recognizing the importance of media shaping much of the public debate and perceptions plans to host journalistic exchanges as well as capacity building events to improve accuracy and analytic capability for better and more constructive reporting on the bilateral relations.

The second Panel: Albania and Serbia towards a European future, gathered diplomats and experts in a discussion of the future of the bilateral relations as well as the various forms and models that can be emulated in the gradual development of a reconciled situation between Albania and Serbia.

It was opened by Aldo Bumci, Vice chair of Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Assembly of Albania. Mr. Bumci stated that according to the survey, the majority of Albanians described the relations between Serbia and Albania as normal and this constitutes an encouraging sign for the further intensification of these relations in the future. Further, Bumci highlighted the importance of the establishment of communication channels between the two countries and stated that the relations between Albania and Serbia should also take into account the interests of Kosovo. "Kosovo is an independent and sovereign country and Albania should not undertake a paternalist position, when it comes to the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. On the other hand the normalization of the relations between Albania and Serbian shall take into consideration the best interests of Pristina", so Mr. Bumci.

H.E. Miroljub Zarić, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia to Albania, emphasized that Serbia is committed to enhance relations with Albania and overcome all differences for the benefit of regional cooperation. He further stated that the Centre for Albanian Serbian relations will contribute to strengthening of relations between the two countries and nations. According to Zarić, cooperation between Albania and Serbia is mostly focused on trade, agriculture and joint

implementation of infrastructure and energy projects. Further, he stated that both countries should resolve some issues inherited from the past, such as the protection of minorities, trade issues related to the import of medicines from Serbia and the return of properties to Serbian citizens.

The most often cited example of normalizations of bilateral relations cited is that between France and Germany, whose reconciliation stands as the cornerstone of the European Union idea. Present in the panel, both ambassadors of Germany and France to Albania elaborated their thoughts on what could work in the case of the two Western Balkan countries.

H.E. Hellmut Hoffmann, Ambassador of Germany to Albania, one of the earliest supporters of this initiative, expressed his willingness to continue his backing for the project of the Centre for Albanian-Serbian relations. “Currently the Balkans is the only region in Europe, where tensions between neighbor countries exist. Many human tragedies have occurred in the past and any initiative that will try to improve relations in the region is more than welcome. The Summit in Thessaloniki taking place in 2003 was a game changer in the stabilization and pacification of the region. In this context, the Western Balkans conference in Berlin and Vienna signed important efforts for the integration of the region into the EU, focused mainly on concrete projects such as youth exchange programs”, said Ambassador Hoffmann. Further on, he stressed that in the past, Albanian-Serbian relations have been rather difficult, but the recent visits of premier Rama in Belgrade and Vučić’s last visit in Tirana, were successful and signed another step forward to the normalization of these relations. According to Hoffmann, the major problem in the relations between the two countries is the issue of Kosovo, which is a sovereign state that can act independently. “Both countries should keep the eyes on EU accession. I am always pleased that Rama used the France-Germany relation as example for the Albanian-Serbian relations. In the future these relations should include a strong component for the young.” concluded the German ambassador.

H.E. Bernard Fitoussi, Ambassador of France to Albania, also praised the initiative and added that EU needs the normalization of relations between the two states, more that the two states need the EU. The French ambassador brought up the example of France and the generation of his parents. He told how French people were raised with the idea that the Germans were the

enemy. However, he stated that his generation was the first to benefit by the collaboration and exchanges by gradually eliminating stereotypes about each other.

“The EU is interested that the region will not become playground of terrorism and outside powers”, so Fitoussi. Further on, he highlighted the major challenges faced by Albania in the EU integration process, such as fight against corruption, reforms in the judiciary and public administration.

The often neglected dimension of human relations and daily life interactions was brought up again by Jelica Minić, Head of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement Serbia who gave some interesting anecdotes about small occurrences in Serbia that witness the increase in interaction and its positive impact. She expressed her enthusiasm and commitment to this initiative, focusing on the positive outcomes that it will bring in the relations between Serbian and Albania. Minić stressed that there are three layers defining the relations between Albania and Serbia. 1. Official bilateral relations between administration and leaders; 2. The participation of both countries into a large number of regional initiatives; 3. Real life stories and experiences by individuals.

On the other hand, she focused on the role of media in building the image of “the other” and agreed that journalism in the region unfortunately is still focusing on the negative sides. According to Minić, Albania-Serbia relations are going upwards, but from time to time they suffer from different oscillations.

During the following public discussion, the problem of hate speech in social media was addressed by many participants. Participants also raised the question of how to deal especially with teenager and the high school students, since according to polls in Serbia, that group is mostly showing nationalistic feelings. In this regard, Mr. Remzi Lani, Director of the Albanian Media Institute, stressed that the relations between both countries should normalize in a sustainable way and then we can proceed with reconciliation.

The Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia is also conducting a comparable survey in Serbia and the results shall be made public in a event next month which will be attended also by representatives of the Albanian Institute for International Studies.
